

Laos Cuisine



salad.

Lao cuisine is the cuisine of the Lao ethnic group of Laos and Northeast Thailand (Isan). Lao food is distinct from other Southeast Asian cuisines. The staple food of the Lao is sticky rice. *Galangal* and fish sauce are important ingredients. The Lao national dish is *laap* (sometimes also spelled *larb*), a spicy mixture of marinated meat and/or fish that is sometimes raw (prepared like *ceviche*) with a variable combination of greens, herbs, and spices. Another characteristic dish is *tam mak hung* (*som tam* in Thai), green papaya

Lao cuisine has many regional variations, according in part to the fresh foods local to each region. In Laos, a French influence is also apparent in the capital city, Vientiane, such that baguettes are sold on the street, and French restaurants (often with a naturally Lao, Asian-fusion touch) are common and popular. Vietnamese cuisine is also popular in Laos.

Batterie de cuisine

The typical Lao stove, or brazier, is called a *tao-lo* and is fueled by charcoal. It is shaped like a bucket, with room for a single pot or pan to sit on top. The wok, *maw khang* in Lao, is used for frying and stir frying. Sticky rice is steamed inside of a bamboo basket, a *huad*, which sits on top of a pot, which is called the *maw nung*.

A large, deep mortar called a *khok* is used for pounding *tam mak hung* and other foods, and is indispensable in the Lao kitchen.

Ingredients

Galangal - typically used in soups, mixed dishes and marinades

Kaffir lime - typically used in soups and stews

Shallots

Lemon grass - used in soups, stews and marinades

Tamarind - used in soups

Tamarind leaf - used in soups

Cha-om (acacia) - used in soups, curries, omelettes, and stir-fries

Coriander (cilantro)

Hot pepper - seven popular types

Thai basil - eaten raw with pho

Mint - used in goy/laap, and eaten raw

Dill - used in stews and eaten raw

Lemon basil - used in soups and stews

Garlic

Ginger

Banana flower - typically eaten raw in vermicelli soups

Ginger flower

Bamboo shoot - used in stews or boiled as a side dish

Rattan shoot - typically in stews (bitter)
Shiitake mushroom - used in soups
Wood ear mushroom (called "cat ear" in Vietnamese) - used in
Egg rolls and soups
Ya nang leaf - used to color (green) and flavor stews
Mak kheua poy - green and white striped eggplant, used in stews
or eaten raw
Mak kheng - another type of eggplant, typically used in stews
Yard long beans - eaten raw and in stews
Phak kadao - (neem) a bitter green, eaten raw
Phak lin may - a bitter green, eaten raw
Phak ileut - a green, eaten raw (this is probably betel leaf)
Dok khae - flower of Sesbania grandiflora (bitter)
Phak bong - ipomoea aquatica, stir fried or eaten raw
Nam pa - clear fish sauce (Thai nam pla)
Padek - Lao-style fish sauce
"Three-layer pork" - pork belly
Dried water buffalo skin - used in jaew bong and stews
Sa khan - stem of Piper ribesioides, used in stews
Kaipen - river algae sheets



Cooking methods

Grilling, boiling, stewing, steaming, searing and mixing (as in salads) are all traditional cooking methods. Stir frying is now common, but considered to be a Chinese influence. Stews are often green in color, because of the large proportion of vegetables used as well as *ya nang* leaf. Soups are categorized as follows, *tom*, *tom cheut*, *keng*, and *keng soua*. *Keng* is soup that contains ginger and *padek*, and *keng soua* is *keng* that contains both galanga and ginger. In effect it is similar to the Siamese *tom yum*. *Tom cheut* is mild soup that isn't flavored with strong spices.

"Ping" means grilled. It is a favorite cooking method. *Ping kai* is grilled chicken, *ping sin* is grilled meat, and *ping pa* is grilled fish. Before grilling, the meat is typically seasoned with minced garlic, minced cilantro root, minced galanga, salt, soy sauce, and fish sauce, each in varying quantities, if at all, according to preference. The Lao seem to prefer a longer grilling at lower heat. The result is grilled meat that is typically drier than what Westerners are accustomed to. The Lao probably prefer their food this way, because they wish to keep their hands dry and clean for handling sticky rice. They also typically eat the grilled food with a hot sauce (*chaew*) of some sort, which takes away the dryness.

Characteristics of Lao food

Lao food differs from neighboring cuisines in multiple respects. One is that the Lao meal almost always includes a large quantity of fresh raw greens, vegetables and herbs served undressed on the side. Another is that savory dishes are never sweet. "Sweet and sour" is generally considered bizarre and foreign in Laos. Yet another is that some dishes are bitter. There is a saying in Lao cuisine, "*van pen lom; khom pen ya*," which can be translated as, "sweet makes you dizzy; bitter makes you healthy." A couple of the green herbs favored in Lao cuisine but generally ignored by their neighbors are mint and dill, both of paramount importance. *Galangal* is a cooking herb that is heavily favored in Laos, unlike in neighboring countries. It appears in probably the majority of Lao dishes, along with the conventional herbs: garlic, shallots, lemongrass, etc. Another distinctive characteristic of Lao food or more properly, Lao eating habits, is that food is frequently eaten at room temperature. This may be attributable to the fact that Lao food served with sticky rice is traditionally handled by hand.

Eating customs

The traditional manner of eating was communal, with diners sitting on a reed mat on the wooden floor around a raised platform woven out of rattan called a *ka toke*. Dishes are arranged on the *ka toke*, which is of a standard size. Where there are many diners, multiple *ka tokes* will be prepared. Each *ka toke* will have one or more baskets of sticky rice, which is shared by all the diners at the *ka toke*.

In recent times, eating at a *ka toke* is the exception rather than the rule. The custom is maintained, however, at temples, where each monk is served his meal on a *ka toke*. Once food is placed on the "*ka toke*" it becomes a "*pha kao*." In modern homes, the term for preparing the table for a meal is still *taeng pha kao*, or prepare the *pha kao*.

Traditionally, spoons were used only for soups and white rice, and chopsticks were used only for noodles. Most food was handled by hand. The reason this custom evolved is probably due to the fact that sticky rice can only be easily handled by hand.

Lao meals typically consist of a soup dish, a grilled dish, a sauce, greens, and a stew or mixed dish (*koy* or *laap*). The greens are usually fresh raw greens, herbs and other vegetables, though depending on the dish they accompany, they could also be steamed or more typically, parboiled. Dishes are not eaten in sequence; the soup is sipped throughout the meal. Beverages, including water, are not typically a part of the meal. When guests are present, the meal is always a feast, with food made in quantities sufficient for twice the number of diners. For a host, not having enough food for guests would be humiliating.

The custom is to close the rice basket when one is finished eating.

Representative dishes

- Laap - a spicy meat salad
- Tam mak hung - green papaya salad
- Soup noh may - green bamboo stew
- Soup phak - vegetable salad
- Keng noh mai som - sour bamboo shoot soup
- Ping sin - dry grilled beef
- Ping kai - grilled chicken
- Sai oua - sausage
- Nem - Lao "fried rice"
- Sin savane - sweet crisp fried beef
- Som moo - pickled pork ("ham")
- Som pa - pickled fish
- Som khai pa - pickled fish roe
- Som phak kad - pickled greens
- Sai oua - sausage
- Mok pa - fish steamed in banana leaf
- Mok kai - chicken steamed in banana leaf
- Or - green vegetable stew
- Or lam - Luang Prabang style green vegetable stew
- Tom padek - fish stewed in padek
- Tom tin moo - pig's trotter soup



Keng som kai - sour chicken soup
Khao poon nam jaew - rice vermicelli soup
Khai khuam - stuffed eggs "upside down"
Pon - spicy puree of cooked fish
Khao nom maw keng - coconut custard cake

Beverages

Lao coffee is often called *Pakxong* coffee (Cafe Pakxong in Lao), which is grown on the Bolovens Plateau around the town of Pakxong. This area is sometimes said to be the best place in Southeast Asia for coffee cultivation. Both robusta and arabica are grown in Laos, and if you ask for arabica, there is a very good chance the proprietor will know what you are talking about. Most of the arabica in Laos is consumed locally and most of the robusta is exported to Thailand, where it goes into Nescafe. The custom in Laos is to drink coffee in glasses, with condensed milk in the bottom, followed by a chaser of green tea. The highly-regarded tea is also grown on the Bolovens Plateau.

There are two general types of traditional alcoholic beverages, both produced from rice: *lao hai* and *lao lao*. *Lao hai* means jar alcohol and is served from an earthen jar. It is communally and competitively drunk through straws at festive occasions. It can be likened to *sake* in appearance and flavor. *Lao lao* or *Lao alcohol* is more like a whiskey. It is also called *lao khao* or, in English, white alcohol. However, there is also a popular variant of *lao lao* made from purple rice, which has a pinkish hue.



*Compiled by Paula Scott, USU Extension, Salt Lake County.
Source: Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lao_cuisine*



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